Appropriations Committee  
March 24, 2017

Senate Bill 368: AN ACT REMOVING PENSIONS FROM THE SCOPE OF COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS FOR STATE EMPLOYEES – Oppose  
Senate Bill 537: AN ACT EXCLUDING HEALTH CARE AND PENSION BENEFITS FROM COLLECTIVE BARGAINING FOR STATE EMPLOYEES – Oppose  
House Bill 6093: AN ACT EXCLUDING RETIREMENT BENEFITS FROM COLLECTIVE BARGAINING BY STATE AND MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES – Oppose

Senator Formica, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Frank T. Francisconi, Jr. I am a retired state employee from New London. I worked for the state for 34 years and three months, working at the Dept. of Transportation, the Department of Public Utility Control, and the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. I was proud to be a state employee; I'm proud to be a member of CSEA Retiree Council 416, and I am glad to have worked in a state (and continue to live and pay taxes in a state) with strong unions representing state and municipal workers. I wish more private sector employees in Connecticut and throughout the country were able (and will be able) to experience the tangible and intangible benefits of unions and collective bargaining, despite the fact that both unions and the collective bargaining process can be difficult and is admittedly imperfect (which is pretty much like everything else we experience as long as we’re breathing, right?). Connecticut has long recognized the value and importance of unions and the benefits of collective bargaining that are realized by both workers and the state as a whole, including secure, dedicated tax paying employees working not for an individual or board of directors, but for the population of the entire state to provide important services, that would otherwise either not exist or would need to be provided by someone else.

Whether those "someone elses" would provide those services as effectively, efficiently and as well as public sector workers is not at all certain, notwithstanding the belief of many that the private sector is, by definition, superior to the public sector.

In saying that, I mean no disrespect to my colleagues and friends in the private sector, many of whom have been treated very unfairly by their employers for too long because of the paucity of unions and collective bargaining rights in the private sector. My objection is to the assumption shared by many that the important work done by public sector employees would, in all cases, be done better by the private sector. I respectfully suggest that the jury remains out on that.

I am testifying to voice my strong opposition to SB 368, SB 537 and HB 6093. Passage of any one of these bills would severely damage the utility and value of collective bargaining and set back hard-fought, well-deserved worker rights, which should, in a fairer world, be available to all workers, whether in the public or private sector. Including retirement, pension and health benefits as issues to be addressed and considered as part of the collective bargaining process for state and municipal employees must be maintained so that the public sector can continue to attract the dedicated employees it has in the past.

Retirement and pension and health care benefits for state and municipal employees are not "gifts" given to one group of people (employees) by another (some abstraction called 'the state' or 'municipality'). Retirement benefits, pensions, and health care benefits arrived at through the occasionally painful and stressful collective bargaining process do not result in either employees or employer getting everything either wants. It is a contract that needs to be respected. And it helps provide the state and its citizens with a public sector workforce whose allegiance and commitment is strengthened by the knowledge that their employers (all citizens of Connecticut, not only the head of an agency or the Governor) respect them and care about their health and well-being after their
working days are over. All competent workers deserve such respect from their employers and in my opinion, eliminating retirement, pensions and health care issues from allowable collective bargaining issues would set Connecticut public sector workers' rights back and send a clear and discouraging signal to private sector employees (who deserve the same consideration and respect as public sector workers have received in Connecticut since the implementation of collective bargaining).

If pension or retirement or health benefits are no longer 'on the table' during collective bargaining, do they disappear entirely for public sector workers? Would workers be required to negotiate with their employers individually? Could a Governor or a legislature unilaterally eliminate or alter those benefits? Are they 'frozen' at current levels?

And I'm also curious about when the Legislature became so concerned that Connecticut statutes be 'in line' with those of neighboring states (See HB 6093). In some cases that may be useful, but I do not believe it is intrinsically worthwhile, much less necessary that Connecticut statutes related to public sector collective bargaining be 'in line with' those of neighboring states. Even if neighboring states' statutes related to public sector employee collective bargaining statutes are in line with each other and different from Connecticut's, it does not make theirs correct and Connecticut's wrong for workers or the citizenry as a whole.

I am also concerned about the seemingly innocuous phrase bandied about by many, not only in the Connecticut General Assembly but among the pundits, commentators and lobbying groups: "pension reform." Who doesn't welcome reform? However, based on my reading of many of the bills purporting to be about "pension reform," what they are really about is "pension destruction," in the same way that many in Congress talk about "Social Security reform," they mean "Social Security privatization or elimination." Please excuse the hackneyed phrase, but "pension reform" is in the eyes of the beholder. Respectfully, I believe that decimating the utility and value of the collective bargaining process for workers does not represent "reform." Any time a worker, (particularly someone who would be directly affected if any of the of the bills referenced above passes) hears his or her representative advocate for "pension reform," the representative should be asked to describe, with specifics, what is meant by that term.

Finally, I would like to communicate, through this testimony, my unalterable belief that private sector workers and public sector workers are not, should not and cannot be enemies. And yet too many people (ironically, many who work in the public sector and have and continue to appreciate the hard-fought and deserved benefits and satisfaction of public service employment) have spent too much time and effort to pit one set of workers (public) against another (private). In my opinion, in a very real way, an assault on public service employee collective bargaining rights is an assault on private sector employee rights. All workers, public and private, care about and deserve the same things: a secure, comfortable (not extravagant) retirement and good, dependable health insurance etc. Passing any law in Connecticut that eliminates important life issues that state and municipal workers care about that can be addressed during collective bargaining will not make private sector workers better off. Private and public sector workers should be working together, not treating each other as competitors.

I urge this Committee to reject SB 368, SB 537 and HB 6093.

I thank the Committee for considering my comments on these important bills.

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